The story of Jacob and Esau is one of the great epic tales of the Bible. Our story of the rivalry of two brothers is but one chapter in a cycle of stories in Genesis 12-50 that could be titled "fathers and sons". This is the saga of Abraham and his sons Isaac and Ishmael, Isaac and his two sons Jacob and Esau, and Jacob and his 12 sons, one of whom was the favored Joseph.

These stories are epic tales because they are about men and women who are "larger than life", giants in the religious and social heritage of the people of the Old Testament. And these stories are epic tales, too, because of what they reveal about everyday men and women. These stories are stories about you, me, and our families, about parents and children: they are about fathers and sons.

Research on the family confirms what the writers of Genesis knew intuitively: Families are living communities, and every family member is embedded in interlocking relationships between and within the generations. If a member of your family has a problem, it is a family problem. And if a member of your family is a success, it is a family success story. Conflicts between parents and their children and sibling rivalries are both inevitable (and natural): that's simply the way families are.

A long-standing pattern of paternal favoritism nearly did in the family of ABRAHAM. Abraham favored his beloved Isaac over his half-brother Ishmael. Jacob was a man of the field, and Esau a man of the forest, and the two brothers were rivals from birth, vying for their parents' attention and blessing. Isaac favored Esau over Jacob, and Isaac's favorite wife Rebekah favored Jacob over Esau. Jacob had 12 sons, but loved Joseph the most, thus provoking 10 of his other sons to sell him into slavery.

All of which suggests that the biblical saying "the sins of the father are visited on the sons" is right on target: the excesses of one generation bear sour fruit in the next generation.

Does this mean we are doomed? Does this mean if you have unhealthy patterns in your family the only thing you can do is blame your parents - or blame yourselves for perpetuating that brokeness for another generation? Is there no way out!

The Jacob-Esau cycle of stories suggests two answers. First, there is no denying that each generation of a family carries a burden of responsibility for succeeding ones: what YOU DO, fathers and mothers, the way you relate to one another, how you parent your children, and how you relate to others outside of the family will have a lasting impact on your children and your grandchildren. The family of Abraham is good example: If you do a good job, expect good results on down the line. And if you do a BAD job, you know what to expect too.
The Jacob-Esau stories suggest that each generation IS responsible for the succeeding one. But the Jacob-Esau cycle also suggests that IT IS POSSIBLE to break the cycle! Look what Joseph did! After being sold into slavery by his brothers and presumed dead by his family, Joseph ascended into prominence in the service of the pharaoh of Egypt. Later, when his brothers came to buy grain, Joseph did not seek revenge. He intervened to teach his brothers a lesson in gracious forgiveness, a lesson that healed family wounds festering for generations, since the day when Jacob swindled Esau out of his birthright.

It is possible to solve family problems and to create healthy and health-giving relationships between fathers and sons, parents and their children. The good news of God we see and hear in the life and teachings of Jesus is the chains which bind us to our past CAN be broken and we are free to live fully in the present, creating a new and wonderful future. By the grace of God you are freed from the bondage of your past, even the shackles of your family – if in faith you open yourself to God's healing power – and if in faith you dare to act for the good of your family.

There once were two fathers. Each of them loved their children. But the first father's children never could manage to please him. They did their best, but if they made "B's" he demanded "A's". If they wanted music lessons, he wanted athletes. If they wanted some time with their father, he was too busy making a living, to provide for them the good life.

Now, don't think too badly of this father. He did take his family to church every Sunday - and on occasion even went himself!

When his children reached their teen years, teenage rebellion set in in a big way, and it did not go well in that household. Remembering how much of a hell raiser HE had been, he resolved to be even stricter than his father had been, just to make sure they did not rebel like he did.

In time, the children moved away, and after their mother died, seldom saw their father anymore. He lived out his days in loneliness and bitterness, wondering why his children never came to see him. Hadn't he given them EVERYTHING?

The other father also loved his children. But things went very differently in his household. It was said that he was not a very good provider, that he was not very ambitious. Indeed, the first father was promoted way ahead of him. But his children did not notice, and neither did he.

For this man was devoted to his wife and to his children. He felt like the richest man in town, because he had healthy, inquisitive children. Now things were not always rosy at his house, to be sure. His children tried out behaviors that troubled him deeply. But, he struggled to live out his belief that his children would only learn responsibility and acquire character if they were given the opportunity to do so.

This second father had not been particularly religious as a youth. But when his children were baptized, he took his vows seriously, and despite himself, he found himself growing in faith even as his
children grew. Daily he sought ways to share his faith and love for God with them. Usually, in small and by appearances insignificant ways, he told them about the wonder of creation and God's love for them, and his love for them, too.

As this second father and his wife aged, their health began to fail. They spent part of each year with their children. The father was amused by his children's child rearing practices. He noted that they had adopted many of his values as a parent, forsaking the rebelliousness of their youth. But he kept such things to himself. His grandchildren found in him a most receptive and sympathetic listener.

Anyone who hears the word of the Lord and receives it NOT is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain poured down, the rivers flooded over, the wind blew against that house, and it fell. And what a terrible fall that was.

But anyone who hears the word of the Lord and receives and obeys that word is like a wise man who built his house upon rock. The rain poured down, the rivers flooded over, and the wind blew against that house. But it did not fall, because it was built on rock.

Brothers, sisters, Fathers, sons: the choice is yours. And by the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ, may you choose life! AMEN.
Matthew 7:24-27

24 “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Genesis 25:19-34

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, 20 and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. 21 Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 22 The children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23 And the LORD said to her,

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.”

24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. 27 Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

28 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. 29 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

30 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. 30a Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” (Therefore he was called Edom.) 31 Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” 32 Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” 33 Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.